

What's in a Name?: The Evolution of the Female Identity in *Shalimar the Clown*

Nyla Ali Khan discusses in her book *Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir* the concept of the “native woman” in Kashmiri literature, where the woman serves as an example of how a woman should behave in the eyes of a patriarchal society. This archetype that is challenged in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*. Through characterizing three generations of Kashmiri women, Rushdie depicts an evolution away from the “native woman” into the self-actualized woman, subverting the Kashmiri patriarchal idea of womanhood.

The Kashmiri patriarchy expectations of the “native woman” can be seen in the treatment of cultural stories. Rushdie shows this through the folktale of Sita, who is being hunted by a demon king. Her only source of protection is a magic line that would protect her if she never invited anyone over it; the plan fails when Sita invites him over the line and he kidnaps her, resulting in war (Rushdie 49). While the female protagonist Boonyi interprets the story as a woman confronting her destiny, the men interpret the story as a representation of how a woman's silliness can undo the power of men (Rushdie 50); this interpretation supports the notion that women cause trouble and they need the constant command of men. According to Khan, this is typical of how the Kashmiri society treats stories of women that promote female independence because it undermines the submissive role they believe women should uphold (58). By enforcing this single perspective of women in cultural stories, the male led society can display how it wants women to behave. However, Rushdie shows that Boonyi's interpretation of Sita implies the women in the book do not take the simplified stories of the culture at face value. They see the strength and ideas of women in the stories and are influenced by these ideas. As the generations progress, these ideas are brought out of the shadows and into fruition.

To gain a more complete image of the evolution, let's first examine the earliest

generation Rushdie depicts. Pamposh has the closest resemblance to the “native woman” in that she outwardly upholds the traditional expectations of women. Pamposh’s narrative occurs prior to India’s break from Great Britain and it’s a time of general harmony, a harmony she contributes to by acting as a dutiful wife who pleases her husband and bears his children (Rushdie 110). However, Pamposh’s friend comments this is only a façade and it’s “just your shell, your hard walnut shell, and inside you’re a completely different girl” (Rushdie 52). This results in her taking on the preferred nickname Giri, or walnut kernel, and begins the motif of women adopting a different name. Yet perhaps the most telling of Pamposh’s removal from the “native woman” is her frankness about sex. Kashmiri culture dictates that sex is a job a woman performs for her husband and not something she has to enjoy herself (84). However, “[Pamposh had] a personality so intensely sexual that it was a wonder [her husband] was still able to get up out of bed and walk around” (52-53); Rushdie is implying that though the intent of sex is for the pleasure of men, Pamposh embraces her sexual appetite and plans to enjoy sex. Therefore, though Pamposh upholds her “native woman” persona publicly, in private she frees herself from that restraint.

It is then Pamposh’s daughter who further distances herself from the “native woman” stereotype. Unlike her mother, Boonyi lived during conflict and, according to Sandra Gilbert, during conflict is when it is most difficult to uphold cultural beliefs. During conflict men become “increasingly removed from their prewar selves” (425), making them less dominating, while “women [seem] to become more powerful” (425). In other words, men are removed from their sense of self while at war, lessening their focus on maintaining societal norms; this gives women, who do not fight in the conflict, a sense of independence. Boonyi subverts the patriarchy’s place

for her when men are at their weakest, making her deviation from the desired embodiment of the “native woman” all the more poignant.

Like Pamposh, Boonyi’s rebellions include her name change and her sexual freedom. When Boonyi is born, she is named Bhoomi, meaning “the earth” (Rushdie 46); the name suggests she is land and something to be owned, leading her to change her name to Boonyi, the Kashmiri word for tree (Rushdie 46). The name suggests that she desires to grow, as opposed to being controlled and owned. From this decision onward Boonyi follows her desires, even if they deviate from patriarchal expectations. Such deviations are seen in her relationships. The tradition is that a woman remains chaste until she married and then will only have sex with her husband (Dhruvarajan 85); however, the unwed Boonyi has a sex with Shalimar (Rushdie 60). This subverts the patriarchy’s idea of sexual and cultural purity. As Monika Bock and Aparna Rao discuss, in this culture there is the standard of keeping blood pure by not mixing with another religious group (101). Boonyi, a Hindu, and Shalimar, a Muslim, having sex undermines these standards of purity; Boonyi is aware of this, but elects to act on her own desires. After they are discovered, their parents insist on their marriage to save their children from shame. In the face of the wedding she realizes that a “married life... didn’t begin to satisfy her hunger” (Rushdie 114). In Boonyi’s eyes, marriage limits her freedom.

Following her marriage, she sees her opportunity to escape when the American Ambassador Maximilian Ophuls comes to Kashmir (Rushdie 133). While most women’s bodies are expected to be submissive to a man, Boonyi uses her body strategically as a negotiating tool. She agrees to leave with Max and be his mistress, under the condition that he provide her with school and a chance to escapes (Rushdie 190). Boonyi grows to regret leaving Kashmir when she realizes she has traded one imprisonment for another (Rushdie 202). Despite this, she is still able

to subvert the control of the patriarchy with her body by getting pregnant; she sneakily avoided the birth control pills she was administered and it is ultimately thanks to this she is able to escape Max's hold (Rushdie 204). This shows that while the "native women" the patriarchy attempts to represent are simply submissive with their bodies, Boonyi uses hers to capture what she wants and to escape the situation she is in—meaning she uses her body primarily for her desires and not a man's.

Unfortunately, Boonyi's divergence from her expected path has consequences. After her child is taken from her, Boonyi is sent back to Kashmir, where she has been shunned from society (Rushdie 223). In her article, Payel Chattopadhyay states that a woman's place at home symbolizes "security, honour and rightful rank of a wife...[and] in a male dominated society, a woman leaving her house for her ambition is never again re-absorbed" (55). Boonyi's decision to defy the role the patriarchy created for her is seen not only as a betrayal to her husband, but the whole community. Shamed, Boonyi retreats away from her village to live in seclusion in the hills (Rushdie 227). Here Boonyi succumbs to entering the "native woman" archetype; she is forced to live the shame the assigned to her by the patriarchy and bides her time until Shalimar makes good on his promise to kill her. Boonyi welcomes this encounter instead of fighting Shalimar, symbolizing her submission to the patriarchy (Rushdie 317-318).

However, with the final generation Rushdie explores shows a complete breaking from the "native woman" in the form of Boonyi and Max's daughter, Kashmira. Though raised in Western society where there is a greater emphasis of female independence, she is spiritually and culturally Kashmiri; due to this, she is able to be considered a Kashmiri woman and can be seen breaking away entirely from the "native woman" archetype that exists in her culture.

Kashmira takes after her predecessors in various ways, including changing her name. At birth, Boonyi names her daughter Kashmira, after her home; however, Max's wife, Peggy, only agrees to let Boonyi go home in exchange for leaving the child with her and she names the baby India (Rushdie 210-211). Despite Peggy's attempts to stifle India's heritage, she feels the name is a "burden" (Rushdie 14). She is aware that this name does not fit her and once she discovers a sense of kinship with the Kashmiri land, she returns to her birth name as it best represents her heritage and her true identity. Also like her mother and grandmother, Kashmira shows herself to be a sexual being. However, while Pamposh and Boonyi only had sex with men who impacted their lives, Kashmira's relationships with men are meaningless, shown with her inability to remember the name of the man with whom she has an ongoing relationship (Rushdie 34). Her main benefit of the relationship is physical instead of an emotional attachment, reversing the traditional role where women are seen as merely an object to satisfy a need; the man is now there to provide a service and nothing more.

However, there is a crucial difference between Kashmira and predecessors that *completely* separates her from the "native woman." Kashmira does not simply subvert the patriarchal rule, but confronts it. Shalimar embodies the concept of the patriarchy when he determines the parameters for Boonyi and her body early in the novel; though she does abandon him despite his threats to pursue her own happiness, by later allowing him to kill her, it is as though she is accepting her punishment for what the patriarchy views as her sins. On the other hand, Kashmira decides she will not wait for Shalimar to kill her, instead she prepares to face him. Kashmira undergoes a physical transformation in order to become a female warrior, even declaring her conflict as "a battle" (369). As she begins training, her male instructor belittles her, suggesting she not damage her beauty by getting into fights and implying women should avoid

fighting altogether (Rushdie 337). Despite this, Kashmira is consistent in her determination and builds her strength. By the time she encounters Shalimar, she is prepared to face him. Though the outcome of the battle between Shalimar and Kashmira is unknown, the act of facing him shows she is not a representation of the “native woman,” but rather a woman refusing to have her place and fate determined by the patriarchy’s.

In *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie is able to depict how women in a patriarchal society have the ability to evolve. Though the Kashmiri culture prefers women be represented as mainly the “native woman”—a woman who obeys the rules of society and never acts in any self-interest in fear of upsetting the established order—in Rushdie’s novel he reveals how Kashmiri women stray from this expectation, breaking from it more and more with each generation. Pamposh publicly maintains the rules of society, her daughter Boonyi starts to break away from those expectations, and Kashmira completely abandons them; with each generation they distanced themselves from the idea of the “native woman”—they able to divorced the image the patriarchy wanted them to have.

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